PATROLLING Rural KENTUCKY: Finding the tactical edge in the commonwealth's countryside

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PHOTOS BY JIM ROBERTSON
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TRANG BASEHEART

PATROLLING Rural KENTUCKY

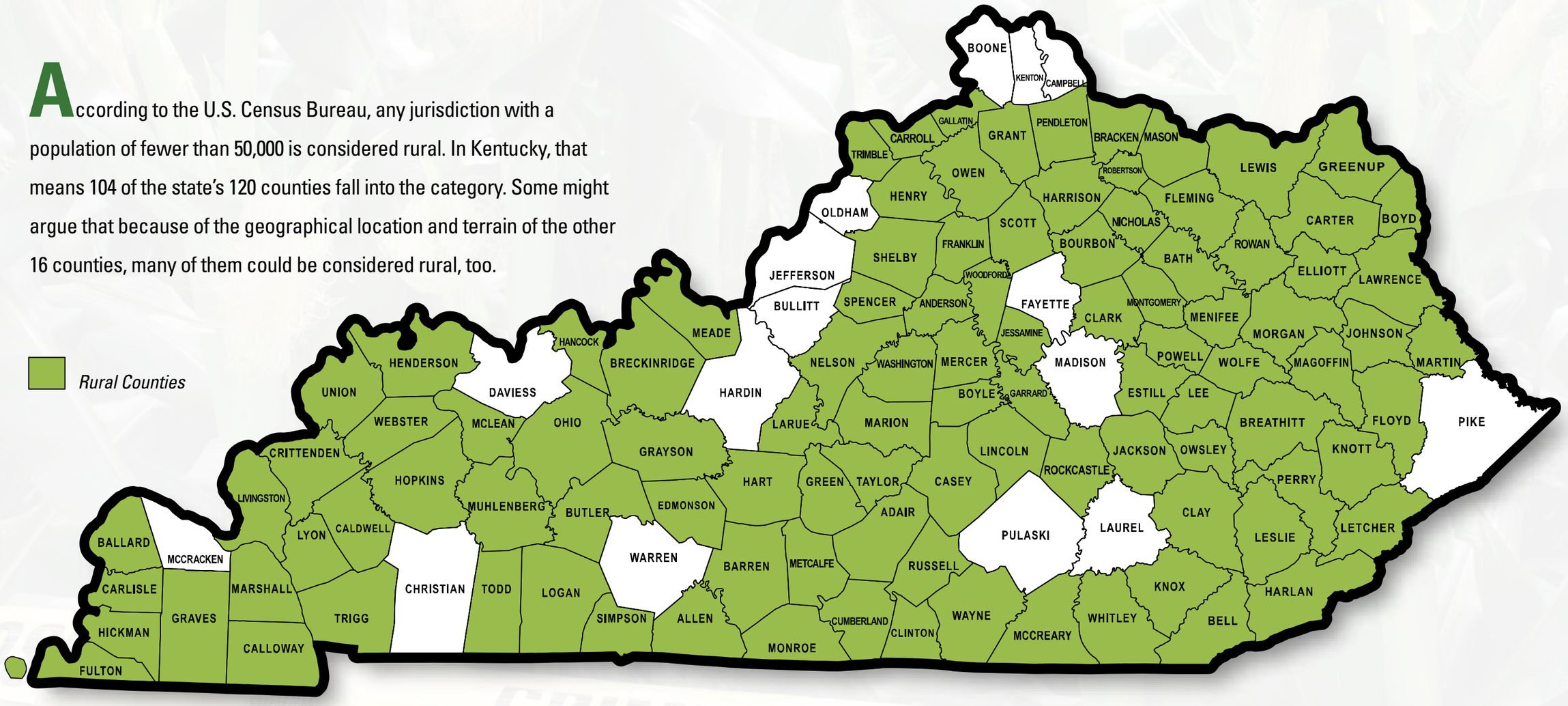
Nestled in a rumpled blanket of blue-green, Kentucky's rural counties to the east contrast vividly with the flatter landscape of counties to the west.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

DEFINING Rural KENTUCKY

From the flat or gently rolling farmland in the west to the mountains and valleys of the east, the majority of Kentucky easily falls within the classic definition of "rural countryside."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, any jurisdiction with a population of fewer than 50,000 is considered rural. In Kentucky, that means 104 of the state's 120 counties fall into the category. Some might argue that because of the geographical location and terrain of the other 16 counties, many of them could be considered rural, too.



If you're a cop in Kentucky, you probably know what it means to police a small-town community. If you've been a deputy for any length of time in your area, you don't need a uniform or patrol car for everyone to recognize you as the law. When you sit down to dinner at the local greasy spoon, it's expected that your food will get cold before you finish talking to folks about current town issues. When you're responding to a call at 2 a.m. in the middle of nowhere, the bad guys presumably know you're alone and your backup isn't anywhere close.

Welcome to rural policing.

If you have grown up in a small town, there are just as many benefits as there are frustrations. After all, if you work in a metropolitan area, it's much less likely that your criminal's mother will send you off with an armful of homegrown zucchini along with her son in handcuffs.

While the slower pace and amenities of a Mayberry-esque community may be comfortable for Kentucky's officers, there is a fine line between comfort and complacent. Knowing how to keep the tactical edge and ensure both the safety of the citizens and yourself must be in constant cognition.

"We have to be very tactically minded," said Ohio County Sheriff David Thompson. "The last thing I want under my watch is to have to go to one of these wives' or husbands' houses and advise them their spouse has been shot."

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

▲ Ohio County Sheriff David Thompson talks with deputies outside the courthouse. Ohio County is a small community, but a close-knit one.

PROTECTING YOUR PEOPLE

When Thompson was elected in Ohio County three years ago, he and his chief deputy, Maj. Steve Kimble, recognized that in order to protect the deputies they employed, they needed to improve the equipment they were provided with which to do their jobs.

"When we first got here, every deputy bought their own cruisers," Thompson said. "So you can imagine the type of vehicles we had. You didn't know if it was a sheriff's deputy or a constable or what out there. We would go to a scene and have to call for a wrecker to come get OUR vehicles. So it was very important for us to have a fleet of cars to get in and arrive to these scenes quickly, safely, and to be recognizable."

Thompson also made sure the deputies were equipped with firearms and bullet-resistant vests, tools for accident reconstruction, and perhaps most exceptional, a pair of dual-purpose K-9s to track drugs and runners. Thompson retired from Owensboro Police Department where he saw the benefits of working police-trained dogs.

"When we talk about these dual-purpose dogs, they are used the same in a city atmosphere as they are in rural," he said. "But they become more important, I think, in a rural area because that dog is that deputy's backup. Our backup out here might be 20 to 30 minutes away — IF there is anybody out there to back you up at all. By having that dog, it is another deterrent to criminals. And these dogs are very well trained. They will protect you if they have to.

"They are not only important to the people who work here, but it's important for the community to know that they have the tools in their county to help combat crime, drugs, bad guys running and hiding through the woods, making meth and all that," Thompson continued.

Like Thompson, Letcher County Police Chief Paul Miles also had fleet issues to deal with when he was hired as the agency's chief in 2009. But instead of consistency in appearance, Miles was concerned about vehicles that could reach his constituents in the mountains surrounding Jenkins and Whitesburg.

"We now have Ford pickup trucks, Explorers and Jeeps," he said.

But that's not all. Because Miles also heads the county emergency management and Pine Mountain Search and Rescue, the agency also has access to multiple all-terrain vehicles, boats and other equipment needed when officers respond with other search and rescue workers to potentially-hazardous scenes.

In Casey County, Liberty Police Chief Steve Garrett also recognized the need for advanced equipment. Following an officer-involved shooting, Garrett acquired Tasers for his officers and AR-15s.

"One of the things about being in an area like this is that every home you go to is going to have some kind of gun in it," said Liberty Sgt. Randy Dial. "You have to be concerned about it because that's something you're going to encounter on basically every call, that a gun is going to be available to them."

That could be a particularly dangerous situation at events such as the city's Apple Festival, which brings in an average of 20,000 visitors and is policed by two — maybe three — Liberty officers at any given time.

More than anything, Garrett said the Tasers have been beneficial because of the fear they've elicited among criminals.

"People are scared to death of the Tasers," Garrett said. "They are a useful tool for intimidation."

Liberty Police Officer George Emerson said the Taser has proved useful more than once.

"I was called out to a domestic and the guy was very belligerent and drunk, on a bunch of drugs and he came out wanting to fight," Emerson said. "Once I pulled the Taser on him he calmed down. I found out he'd been tased before."

"That's another thing about a small town like this," Dial added. "People who have been tasered, a lot of other people know them and they've heard it straight from someone who's been tasered how bad it hurts."

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Few things are worse than calling for help and realizing no one can hear you. But when you're in the mountains and wooded valleys of the commonwealth, there's a good chance technology is going to fail.

Liberty Chief Garrett said in most cases, their radios don't work. The majority of the agency's communication with each other, dispatch and other local agencies is through their cell phones.

"There are a lot of times if we didn't have cell phones we wouldn't have any communication with anybody," Sgt. Dial said. "We'd be cut off."

About once an hour, Garrett said the local dispatchers will check in with the officers to make sure everything is running smoothly. If they don't hear back from them within three minutes, they start to take action to ensure the officers' safety. >>


PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

▶ The Ohio County Sheriff's Office uses two K-9's for tracking people and searching for drugs. Sheriff David Thompson said the dogs are invaluable in the rural community.

A common sight in eastern Kentucky's mountains, early morning mist hovers above rural traffic as a patrol car (lower left) keeps vigil. Sparse population qualifies all but one eastern county as rural.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

>> Sheriff Thompson experienced an entirely different situation in his first weeks on the job when everyone — including the criminals — could hear everything he had to say on the radio.

"We needed to upgrade the system to be able to get rid of scanner land," he said. "It makes it a lot safer for my deputies and the community as a whole when people can't hear what's going on."

Ohio County citizens had grown accustomed to listening to the police scanner for entertainment. Even, Thompson said, at 2 a.m. in the dead of winter.

"He went out on a meth lab early in the morning and is out there in 18 degrees doing a search of this area for the lab," Maj. Kimble said, recalling Thompson's farcical experience. "All of a sudden, on this rural, county, hilly, wooded-area road in the middle of nowhere, headlights come from all over and start going up and down the road. Because everybody listened to the scanner like it was a prime-time network show."

"Not only that," Sheriff Thompson added, "but when I finally made contact with the person, he comes out of his house, gets in his car and I stop him. I obviously say, 'Hey, do you have any drugs or weapons on you?' The guy laughed at me. 'You think I'm going to have guns and weapons on me when I've had 20 people call and tell me you're out here in front of my house waiting for me and supposedly chasing me through the woods?' the suspect asked. At that point it looked like Owensboro on a Friday night. And it was 18 degrees outside and 2 in the morning. It was an awakening experience for me. At that point, I knew we had to do something about the radios. It was a safety issue."

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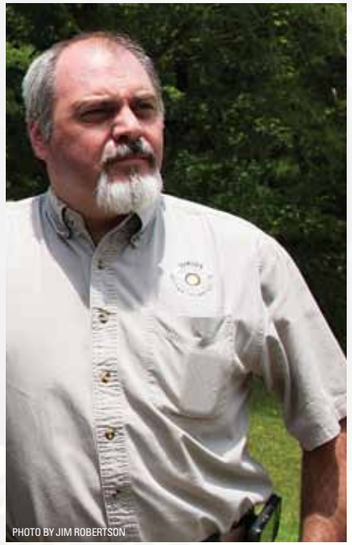

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

▲ Letcher County Police Chief Paul Miles has been a part of the county's law enforcement for several decades. His dual roles serving as both police chief and emergency management director keep him always looking for someone in trouble.

TRAINING FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

Every officer in the state knows they need to be well trained to do their jobs. In rural Kentucky, these officers must stay current on specific training that uniquely applies to the tools and terrain with which they work.

Having all the equipment you need is only as good as how well you know how to use it. If you don't know how to operate an ATV, it will be awfully hard to get to your victim in the woods. For that reason, Miles said all of his Letcher County officers are cross trained on the equipment needed for search and rescue.

"We train every other week," Miles said. "We train on basic search and rescue, man tracking, first aid and CPR. Last night we trained on patient packaging and ATV extraction. It's crucial for us."

Before the LCPD was formed in 2009, Miles said the closest active search and rescue squad was in Madison County — a two-hour trip from the mountains of Letcher County. When minutes count, Miles said it was imperative that his staff be trained.

Sheriff Thompson agreed.

"There are many things we try to do to keep our people safe out there, but the best thing we can do obviously is training," he said. "We are very big advocates of training — the most and best we can get is what we're going to do."

Because of the quantity and severity of wrecks in the county, Thompson has prepared two officers who are trained in accident reconstruction, he said. He also has had officers trained as firearms instructors, drug recognition experts and in crisis intervention because those issues were recognized as necessary training needs.

"Because of the time it takes us to transport someone, we have to be able to talk to people and understand which are under the influence of narcotics and which are mentally ill," Thompson said of the CIT and DRE training. "Also, when you have an accident in the county, they are usually very, very bad because of the curvy, dark roads, the deer and other animals. We have limited resources, but we're well diversified in the trainings these people get and the things they do. We have to have people who are trained to deal with these situations."

Additionally, Maj. Kimble said when deputies are scheduling their advanced individual training each year, the agency now has developed a selected curriculum that is specific to the career-building needs of each person.

"They don't just pick something anymore," Kimble said. "We send them to what we think is best for whatever the job is that they are doing."

Chief Garrett said his department also is selective about the training for the city's officers.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

◀ Ohio County Maj. Steve Kimble spent most of his career policing a metropolitan community. Joining the Ohio County Sheriff's Office has given him a greater respect for the varied work of small-town sheriffs' agencies.

"We train a lot on just tactics," he said. "Last week we had a meeting about safety and things like wearing a vest. We shoot a lot. We have Taser training once a year. We take in-service classes that are beneficial to the job and will benefit us when we're working by ourselves."

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY, NOT AGAINST IT

Sometimes training to work in a rural community involves a shift in mindset. Often in policing an "us versus them" mentality settles in among an agency's officers who must always be mindful of those who would wish them harm.

Recognizing, however, that the percentage of those who harbor an ill-will against officers is a small one, embracing community members for their usefulness and earning their respect in a small town can be a necessity.

"I was out with a guy on a domestic and he was causing problems," Chief Garrett said. "I was wrestling with him on the sidewalk and a guy pulls over and opens up the back door of my cruiser for me and helped me get him in the back seat. Sometimes we'll take what we can get."

In Ohio County, Kimble said making the acquaintance of community members in the county compared to his experience with citizens in his previous employment with Owensboro Police took some getting used to.

"Some of the first contacts I had with people coming in or wanting to discuss a problem with me after coming here (to Ohio County) involved whether I knew somebody or was related to someone," Kimble said. "What I learned over time is that the first part of a conversation is kind of identifying who you have contacts with. Because it is such a close community, everybody knows everybody. They want to know where you're at in the culture. Where I'm from, that didn't come up like it does here as a qualification for how I am going to take care of their problem."

Another way Ohio County has found to let the community get to know them and understand the agency's mission is through a strong relationship with the local media. Thompson said the local radio station has a lunchtime talk show and welcomes officers to talk to the public whenever they have a need to do so. The weekly newspaper also has proved helpful as an avenue for communication with the public.

"It's very important that we have those relationships," Thompson said. "Not so long ago — and still in a lot of places — the media and law enforcement were enemies. We didn't want to give them anything because we didn't think they needed to know, and they are going to print something so they print what they're hearing from someone else. In this community, people rely on that paper. So it's very important to us to have a trusting, transparent relationship. That helps us."

In the long run, building those relationships with citizens in the community will make solving crime easier, too, Chief Garrett said.

"I enjoy working in a small town," he said. "You know the people, and if you don't know somebody, you know somebody who does. That helps out a lot. Once you build up a certain reputation I think that helps when you're talking to people that they know what to expect. A lot of people think the police will lie to them. If they know you and know you've been here a long time, they know what you're about."

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Liberty Police Officer George Emerson talks to a local boy and his grandfather as they walk the city streets on a sunny afternoon.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

When You Live in a Fish Bowl:

LIBERTY POLICE OFFICERS TALK ABOUT BEING OFF DUTY IN A SMALL TOWN

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In a small-town community, sometimes it can be difficult to truly be off duty.

"It's pretty common that people have our cell phone numbers and call thinking you're working, whether it's 2 o'clock in the day or 2 o'clock in the morning," said Liberty Police Chief Steve Garrett. "That's just part of working at a small agency. When I lived in town people would stop at my house at least two to three times a week wanting a job."

Liberty Sgt. Randy Dial acknowledged similar experiences.

"Everybody around here knows me," he said. "If they need something right away they'll come to my house."

Sometimes it isn't citizens calling — it's co-workers or another local agency calling for help.

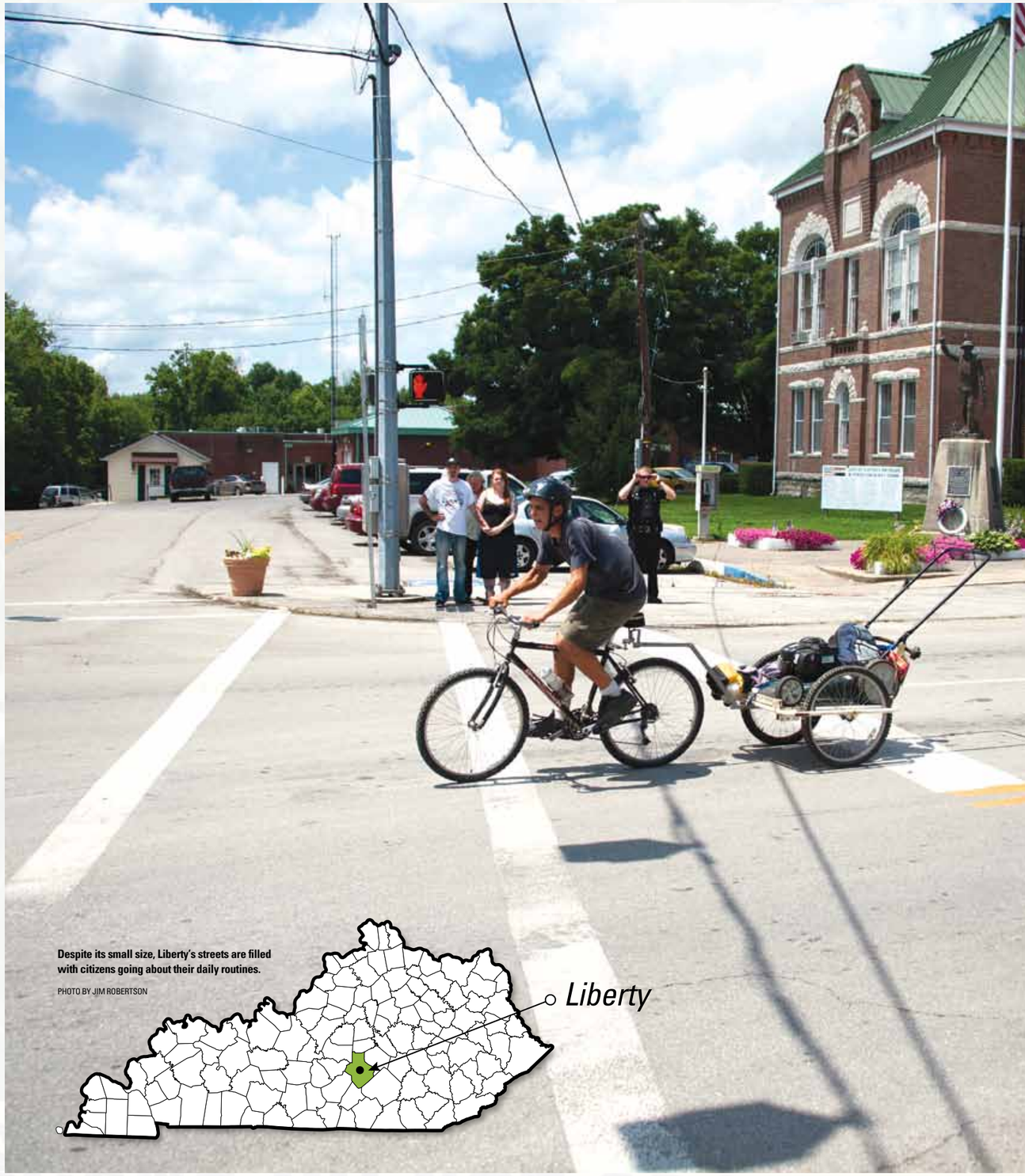
"There may only be one of us out, but we all live in a close area," said Liberty Officer Doug Tarter. "I live south of town, but they can always call me if something is coming that way or they need someone here. Everyone is just a phone call away. We all keep our phones with us."

Regardless of who it is on the other end of the line, eventually you need a break. Without one, stress and exhaustion begin to mount and you are likely to begin unraveling. And that isn't safe for anyone.

"I am divorced once, so yes, I think this job helped me get divorced," Garrett said. "I hate to sound bad, but it takes a while to balance that out. It took me several years to learn how to balance that and not just devote all my time to work. I think for the most part, people >>

Liberty Sgt. Randy Dial, left, and Chief Steve Garrett discuss the complexities of rural policing. In Liberty, according to Dial, officers must consider the possibility of a gun awaiting them at every call.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON



Despite its small size, Liberty's streets are filled with citizens going about their daily routines.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

>> understand that we have to put our family first, but we sure have to put our job a close second."

On any given off-duty day, Garrett said his phone rings upwards of 50 times. It can be exhausting for the officer and the family to have the constant interruptions. Despite needing to be available to his officers, Garrett urged the necessity of turning off the ringer every once in a while.

"Put your family first," he said. "You might work 25 years at a police department and you can retire and you can't get away from it. Some people retire and they die — they don't have anything to go back to. You better keep that family where they need to be so you have something to go to when you do retire."

Liberty Officer George Emerson hangs his uniform in the back of his closet and is happy to no longer have home-fleet vehicles.

"I like to have things out of sight and out of mind," he said. "Having that car in the driveway all the time made me think about work."

There are many tricks these officers employ to maintain a sense of self outside the job. Dial farms on the side to relax. Emerson takes his family camping. Tarter owns land where he rides 4-wheelers. Garrett's 13-month-old twins keep him entertained.

One of the most significant ways the officers decompress is by ensuring that everyone takes their vacation time every year to get away and relax.

"It's easy to get a bad attitude being a police officer," Garrett said. "You have to look at the positive side of things sometimes and not let the job get to you. All day long you deal with the worst people, you go home, and those people aren't your wife and kids. You might be mad at work, but just leave it at work. Sometimes that's hard. We take things kind of personal sometimes, and that's not a good way to do it. When you're dealing with other people's problems all day, sometimes you can just be glad that you don't have those same problems."

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PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

▲ Liberty Police Officer George Emerson works part time for the city and is attending college to further his education while balancing both jobs with his family. Finding that balance is often its own job in rural policing.

Liberty, Ky. is the county seat of Casey County and is home to about 2,200 citizens.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

Active Shooters in a Rural Setting: HOW DO YOU HANDLE IT?

Active-shooter training is a necessary part of incident preparation in today's society. In many cases, officers and deputies train inside schools where many have been known to unleash their weapons on the unsuspecting public.

But when you're on rural patrol and your community includes more wide-open land mass than multi-room buildings, it's important to adjust the tactics to the surroundings.

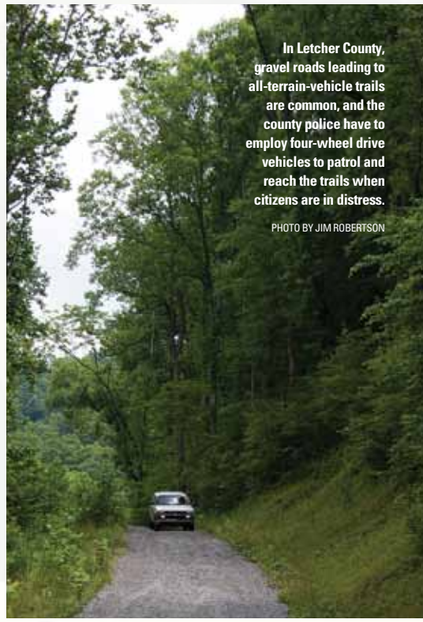
Police One correspondent Pat Novesky has spent more than 20 years working in a rural law enforcement environment and urges officers to consider the possibility of adding meth labs, rural rave parties, major hunting violations and organized marijuana grow operations to the list of situations a rural officer may encounter with active shooters.

"What if your incident places you in a wooded area?" he said. "Instead of clearing rooms, you're going to be clearing dense woods, abandoned vehicles, tents, cabins and caves. Small-town cops know we are likely to be standing alone on that dirt road listening to the shots. Are you prepared to walk into that battlefield to stop the threat? Will the same active-shooter response be effective?"

After arriving on a scene with an active shooter, Novesky encourages officers to ask and answer the following questions:

- **What do you see?** Parked cars? Recreational vehicles? Squad car? Foot path? Dirt road? Is anything related to the incident?
- **If you're at a dead end or on a forest road, is it worth parking your squad car across to keep anyone from driving out?** Can you take the keys from any vehicles parked until you figure out what is going on? What about writing down registration numbers?
- **Can you communicate?** The radio headache can happen out in a remote area as easily (maybe more so) as inside a building. Can you talk with dispatch? Many of us would be on our mobile radios telling dispatch we are going to be on portable, then be out of communication until we are back to the squad. You need to know which frequencies work in different areas — sometimes you can't talk on your regular channel, but a fire service, fish and game, car-to-car or park service channel might work. You have to have this information before you need it.
- **Who might be backing you up?** Can you communicate with them? Do they know what channel on which to call you? Sitting in the squad car waiting for backup makes you a sitting duck. Cops always hate to shut cars off, but you need to shut down, grab your gear and get away from your squad car and listen.
- **What do you hear?** Is the action close to you or out of sight?
- **If you hear shots, do you know what they are?** Can you determine what direction they are coming from? A good training exercise is to take a few moments at your qualifying shoots and have someone go out of sight from the range and fire several different weapons. Then officers can become familiar with the sound made by each and even the direction the shot came from if you have a large enough area where you can get some distance from the range. Knowing the difference between the sound of a 9mm and a .308 is an important piece of information for any officer to know. An hour of training can give cops a big tactical advantage before going into a scene.
- **Can you hear people's voices or movements?** Listen for talking, yelling, crying, brush snapping. Should we go in?
- **What is our immediate cause of action?** Think active-shooter training: neutralize the threat and stop the killing. It does not matter if you are by yourself or with four other cops, this is what we are paid to do. What if we have another officer or two? Is staying in a tight formation best or should you spread out? Do you have the needed firepower available? This is, no doubt, a long gun situation. Do you have extra ammo? What else should you have?

Questions excerpted from Novesky's article, "When 'Rambo' becomes reality."



In Letcher County, gravel roads leading to all-terrain-vehicle trails are common, and the county police have to employ four-wheel drive vehicles to patrol and reach the trails when citizens are in distress.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON